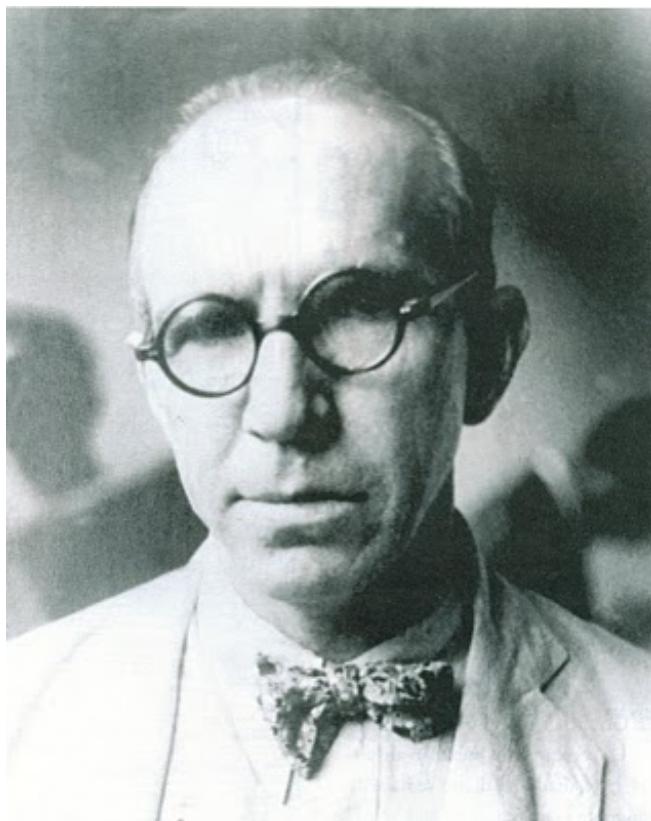


From Gómez to Chávez and beyond: Reading the poetry of Leoncio Martínez in Venezuela

May 07, 2013 by [Editora](#)

By Nicholas Roberts*

In 1920, festering in La Rotunda prison in Caracas, where he was being held as a political prisoner during the brutal regime of Juan Vicente Gómez, the poet, dramatist, and caricaturist Leoncio Martínez ('Leo') wrote one of the greatest and most significant poems to emerge from Venezuela in the twentieth century. I say greatest, but this not should be taken as an indication of a dazzling use of metre, nor should it be seen to signal the presence of an innovative scheme of internal rhyme. 'Ballad of the Sleepless Prisoner' is great because it does what all great poetry should do: it moves, it resonates, it endures. And, within Venezuelan political history, it repeatedly invokes itself, posing questions and reflections of each new generation of reader, not least the generation that has lived through the Chávez years and into the post-Chávez era.



'I am thinking of going into exile | of going away far from here | to a strange land where I might enjoy | the freedoms of living'. So begins the poem, the poetic figure, wallowing in the animalesque conditions of his cell, contemplating the idea of leaving behind his Venezuelan homeland in search of political and social freedoms. Yet as the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the heart of the poem is very different: each positive image of the life to be afforded by such a move decays and gives way to images and sensations of the Venezuelan land, of friends and family lost and left behind, of the freedoms that once were but are now simply childhood memories. The move into exile coalesces around the devastating image of the now-aged poet dying abroad, bereft, cut off both from his past, with his homeland distant in time and place, and from his future, as into his grandchildren's hair 'I will sink my feverish hand, | I will throw back their heads | And, in the depths of their gaze, | I will seek, vainly, | the clear sun of my country'. And it is in this last line that the poem finds its anchor, the 'clear sun of my country' acting as a refrain to which the poet repeatedly returns. Initially a reference to the sunlight glinting on the courtyard outside the high window bars of the prison cell, it soon becomes a marker for the burning heat, essence, and being of Venezuela, the Venezuela that the poet, like the poem, cannot let go of, the Venezuela obscured by the tyranny of Gómez.

Thus it is that 'Ballad of the Sleepless Prisoner' came to etch itself into the Venezuelan cultural psyche as a poem of resistance, of hope, of fortitude, its depiction of the orphaned fate of the man forced into exile in the face of oppression and repression wistfully, yet triumphantly and poetically, countered by the recurrent allusion to the clear sun of Venezuela. (It is not insignificant that Leoncio Martínez never did abandon his country.)

Not surprisingly, there have been moments and periods in Venezuela's subsequent history when the poem has assumed particular resonance. Thirty years after the poem's composition, for example, following the 1948 coup that led to the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952-1958), the experiences and sentiments that seep through every syllable of Martínez's poem would gain new traction and meaning. Regarding this period, the Venezuelan poet Alberto Hernández has spoken of the way in which the poem became 'life-giving material' for his father, one of many imprisoned during this time.

But there was another moment when Leo's poem rose to the surface of Venezuelan cultural consciousness, one signalled by the poem itself. The sixth and final stanza, considerably shorter than the other five, brings 'Ballad of the Sleepless Prisoner' to a close with a simple implied question hesitating between hope and resignation, a question aimed into the future and into our present: 'Ah, who knows if by then, | by around about the year 2000, | freedoms are being shone on by | the clear sun of my country'. Leoncio Martínez, writing in 1920, could hardly have envisaged that his projected call to then-distant generations of Venezuelans to weigh up the state of their country and its freedoms would coincide with the early years of arguably the most divisive and debated periods of governance in Venezuelan history: that of Hugo Chávez.

As was to be expected, then, there have been many recent responses to Leoncio Martínez's poem, but I will focus on just two. The first is that of Eugenio Montejo, the most significant poet to emerge from Venezuela in the last sixty years. In an essay written in 2001, Montejo turned the implied question with which Martínez ended his poem into a simple question in the present tense: 'Are freedoms being shone on | By the clear sun of my country?' It is not answered directly by Montejo, reflecting the poet's preference for avoiding explicit political commentary in his published work. But his strongly critical personal stance in relation to Chávez, both in 2001 and increasingly thereafter until his death in 2008, leave little doubt as to the nature of his implied answer: Leoncio Martínez's poem continues to act for Montejo as it had done before for others in 1920 and in 1950, as a poem with which to identify and onto which to hold in the face of a repressive political reality.

The second response on which I will comment is, again, implied. In fact, it is not a response at all, but simply a reproduction of the poem. As is ever the case, context here is everything, and that context is the 2008 anthology *The Heart of Venezuela: Fatherland and Poetry*, published by the state (and Chávez-run) oil company PDVSA. It is a collection concerned with setting out a sense of fatherland, of, to be sure, the Bolivarian Fatherland of Chávez ideology, and 'Ballad of the Sleepless Prisoner' is, in its inclusion, marshalled towards this end, as we are invited to see the distant hopes of Leoncio Martínez for a Venezuela of political and social freedoms as having been realised under the Chávez government.

Some eighty to ninety plus years after its composition, then, Martínez's poem has assumed a new role, at the centre of the Chávez-era debate regarding the nature and understanding of Venezuela. A poem reiteratively concerned with the latent but lost essence of the country, it finds itself invoked both by those who see the Bolivarian Revolution as constituting the emergence of that essence of Venezuelan being, and by those who consider the Revolution to be a continuation of its suppression. Its final interrogative, that is, still calls to reflection, still demands a response, only now that response is multiple and divergent, and thus reflective of modern-day Venezuela.

As Montejo ends his essay by suggesting, the question posed at the conclusion of 'Ballad of the Sleepless Prisoner', freed from its temporal hook, is surely one that will continue to require a response from future generations of readers; and the darkness and the light of this poem, written almost a hundred years ago, will continue to move and to resonate. As I sit in front of my laptop, following the recent, contested election of Nicolás Maduro as President of the country, watching images of the National Guard shooting unarmed civilians at point-blank range, I cannot help but notice the way the sun glints off the barrels of their polished rifles.

